Subject: Facts about lack of artistic qualities in U.S. war medals

Moore, Charles

[Library of Congress

Washington, D.C.]

1918-1920

November 15th, 1918.

Mr. Charles Moore,
Library of Congress,
Washington, D. C.

Dear Sir:-

According to your request when here in New York, and a supplementary request from Mr. Herbert Adams, concerning an outline of pertinent facts about the lack of artistic qualities, &c. of our war medals in comparison with foreign ones, I am enclosing herewith two criticisms written by different members of our Staff. Make use of these as you see fit. On talking the matter over with several of our Officers, they thought it best that our name should not enter into any discussion as we do not want to get the War Department down on us by criticizing what has been done in the past, as you know we are still trying to get the Distinguished Service Crosses and the Medal. In our criticism you will note that we have made a mention of bars for the campaign medals. These bars are used by nearly all of the other countries. It gives each medal a distinctive character of its own showing thereby whether a man has been simply in the war or in action. If in the latter, indicates what battles he has been in.

I beg to remain,

Yours very truly,

Curator.

Letter to Charles Moore

A comparison of our American war medals and decoarions with those of foreign nations does not give to the loyal citizen any cause for pride. There seems to have been a lack of consistent artistic purpose in their design and production which has had most unfortunate results.

The Medal of Honor, our most important and highest award for valor contrasts most unfavorably with the Victoria Cross, the foreign decoration nearest to it in significance. In the form used for the Army it lacks dignity and strength, elements important in a military decoration, and both found in the Victoria Cross. Artistically it perhaps equals the Cross in design but the strictly artistic merit of the Victoria Cross is not great and whatever claim the Medal of Honor has to beauty in form is more than offset by the atrocious color scheme. The metal is neither gold nor bronze while the unfortunate shade of green used for the enamel wreath kills completely the real beauty and distinction of the ribbon. The wreath in its outline lacks character and cannot compare in any way with the wreath on the French Legion of Honor. Our medal also is a trifle too small and gives the impression of being too effeminate.

The type of Medal of Honor used in the Navy is better in that it is simple and substantial. In its present state it is but the lower part of the older form of the medal, and is consequently lacking in balance.

Our new Distinguished Service Cross is an improvement but it by no means equals in beauty and appropriateness the French Croix de Guerre with which it compares most nearly in importance. It is unfortunate in being too ecclesiatical in appearance and its ribbon lacks distinction.

The American Distinguished Service Medal is the least to be criticized and more nearly approaches the desired standard.

In campaign medals the English far excel us in beauty and interest except in a few cases. To be sure the problem of design is simplified for the English artist by the established custom of using the portrait of the reigning monarch for the obverse of these medals but the reverses are all interesting, appropriate and in most cases beautiful which is more than can be said for many of our campaign medals.

A feature of the English medals which might be well for us to consider is the custom of issuing separate bars for each battle, campaign or period of the war or service for which the medal is awarded. This makes each medal a more detailed history of its wearer's record.

One of the most telling points of a medal is the ribbon. More careful consideration should be given these both in conjunction with the medal and its effect as a narrow strip on the bar when the medal is not worn.

For the most part our ribbons have been good. They should be distinctive with some bearing as to what they represent and should not conflict or be the same as foreign ribbons.

Our Medal of Honor ribbon is both good and distinctive. It can be easily told and is absolutely different from any other.

The ribbon for the Distinguished Service Cross is unfortunate. It is not unlike several foreign ribbons and can hardly be told from our Philippine Congressional badge. The ribbon for our Distinguished Service Medal is good and easily distinguishable from other ribbons.

Although all foreign medals and badges are by no means good or artistic our own medals do not begin to hold their own as they should, least of all with those issued by the Latin American countries.

It is time the matter was taken up and given serious consideration.

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The type of Medal of Honor used in the Navy is better in that it is simple and substantial, ~~and its bronze color harmonizes acceptably with the ribbon but is certainly not beautiful.~~ (2)

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A comparative study of the war medals and campaign badges issued by our own government with the same kind of medals issued by other governments gives one the impression that our medals lack character.

Our Medal of Honor, our highest award, is insipid and lacks character. It is a trifle too small and in color is neither bronze nor gold, and is somewhat confused in outline. The small amount of green enamel on it detracts rather than adds to its effect. In fact there is no brightness or contrast to the medal. The only saving grace about it is the ribbon.

The Naval Medal of Honor is absolutely bad. The only thing that can be said in its favor is that what there is of it is substantial. Anything artistic about it is non-existant.

The present Distinguished Service Cross has some traces of being good but it is far from being what it should be either in artistic effect or in its general conception. It gives one the impression of being too ecclesiatical.

The new Distinguished Service Medal is better, but is by no means what it should be. In fact all of our medals show a lack of careful study as to purpose, adaptation, form, artistic effect, color and balance.

Our Campaign badges are a dreary lot, but the nature of these preclude any diversity of form or shape. Nevertheless any future badges to be made should have the merit of being at least artistic.

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December 1st, 1920.

Mr. Charles Moore,
Commission of Fine Arts,
Washington, D. C.

Dear Sir:-

I beg to acknowledge the receipt of the Victory Medal with all the clasps, the two buttons and the two stars that go with it. I wish to thank both you and Colonel Wyllie for having these sent on to us.

I remain,

Very truly yours,

Curator.

December 1st, 1920.

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Museum of Fine Arts,
Washington, D. C.

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